

the desert to meet him. I like the desert enormously. The first year I feared it somewhat because of its wind and sand; moreover, having no destination, I didn't know when to stop and tired myself quickly. I preferred the shady paths under the palms, the gardens of Ouardi, the vil-
 lages. But last year I went for long walks. I had no other aim than to lose sight of the oasis. I walked; I walked until I felt infinitely alone in the plain. Then I began to look about me. The sands had velvety patches in the shadow on the slope of their hillocks, where insects' footprints could be seen; colocynths were wilting, tiger-beetles were running over the sand; there were marvelous rustlings in each breath of wind and, because of the intense silence, the most delicate sound could be heard. At times an eagle would fly up from the direction of the big dune. This monotonous expanse seemed to me each day to contain a more appar-
 ent diversity.

I knew the keepers of nomadic flocks; I used to go to meet them; I talked with them; some of them played the flute. Occasionally I would sit for a long time near them without doing anything; I always took along a book, but almost never opened it. Often I did not return until evening. But Athman, to whom I spoke of these excursions, told me that they were unwise since prowling Arabs frequent the approaches to the oases and rob foreigners whom they know to be incapable of de-
 fending themselves; it would have been normal for them to attack me. Thereafter he wanted to accompany me, but since he did not like walk-
 ing, my expeditions became shorter, then ceased altogether.

Athman reads like Bouvard and writes like P[^]cuchet¹. He educates himself with all his might and copies anything that comes his way. He prefers H&rolcTs *La Joie de Maguelonne* to my *Tentative amoiireuse*;

he finds the *Tentative* badly written. "You use the word
grass too often/
he told me.

I give him *Les Mille et Une Nuits** One evening he
takes the book
to Bordj Boulakras, where he sleeps, to read it with his
friend Bachaga.
The next day he doesn't come until ten o'clock, still
heavy with sleep;
he and his friend read the story of "Aladdin and the
Wonderful Lamp"
until two o'clock, he says, adding: "Oh, we spent a very
good nocturnal
evening!" To him *nocturnal* means when you stay up
late.

At the end of the oasis, on the deserted ruins of the
old fort near
which we are passing on this moonlight night, white-
robed Arabs, ly-
ing on the ground, are talking in low voices and one of
them is whis-
pering on his flute. "They are going to spend a
nocturnal night/" Athman

¹ A reference to Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*
(1881), which satirizes
the stupidity of the philistines.

² *The Thousand and One Nights* in the translation by
Dr. J. C. Mardrus,